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Navy seeks to navigate hi-tech waters

By Liza Porteus, National Journal's Technology Daily

In an effort to aid in the modernization of the nation's military, the Navy is working to integrate technologies into its communication systems and is trying to get a head start on federal directives aimed at bringing the federal government into the information age.

"The world is changing... You really can't keep doing things the same way you've been doing them," Navy Deputy Chief Information Officer Dave Wennergren told an E-Gov conference Wednesday. But "these initiatives can only be successful if you take security to heart and do something about it."

The Navy contracts with the private sector to run the Navy Marine Corp Intranet (NMCI), where the goal is to consolidate the various networks currently running the department onto a single network using public key infrastructure (PKI) and other security tools to connect the estimated 800,000 Navy personnel around the world.

Wennergren said the full deployment of NMCI will signal the department's transformation. The system is designed to enhance areas such as telemedicine, telemaintenance and distance learning.

"It's going to reinvent things across our organization," Wennergren said. "People are going to be connected as they never have been before."

The Defense Department also has been giving its personnel smart cards, which include PKI-enabled digital certificates that help verify digital signatures and other identification features.

For example, the department is offering common access cards to more than 1 million Navy personnel and 2.5 million cards to other Defense Department employees during the next two years. The ID cards will be used to access buildings and controlled spaces, and will grant certain personnel access to computer networks and systems with the implementation of the Navy's intranet.

The Navy will use the PKI-enabled cards to enhance security, improve interoperability, increase access to information and enable secure e-business transactions.

Wennergren stressed that PKI technologies are the "building blocks" of information security. The only other way to ensure such strong security is to isolate information systems from the rest of the world, he said.

Wennergren said he is pushing the idea of a single digital certificate that industry could use to do business with government entities, instead of different certificates applicable to different agencies. "I think we're actually getting pretty close to that," he said.

Wennergren said the Navy also is working on e-business applications and a single portal for remote users to conduct all transactions via any electronic device, such as a cell phone or laptop.

The Navy is trying to get a head start in complying with the 2000 Government Information Security Reform Act, which requires chief information officers and inspectors general in government agencies to assess the vulnerability of their security programs and practices. The Navy also has established a privacy advocacy group and assembled a toolkit focusing on privacy and security.